

# Getting Ready



## Executive Summary

**National School Readiness Indicators Initiative**

**A 17 State Partnership**

Sponsored by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation,  
the Kauffman Foundation and the Ford Foundation

Prepared by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

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**Today we know more than ever before about how young children develop and about how to best support early learning.**

## **Ready or not?**

The first five years of life are critical to a child's lifelong development. Young children's earliest experiences and environments set the stage for future development and success in school and life. Early experiences actually influence brain development, establishing the neural connections that provide the foundation for language, reasoning, problem solving, social skills, behavior and emotional health.<sup>1,2</sup>

Families and communities play critical roles in helping children get ready for school. Children from families that are economically secure and have healthy relationships

are more likely to succeed in school. Infants and young children thrive when parents and families are able to surround them with love and support and opportunities to learn and explore their world.<sup>3</sup> Communities are vibrant when they provide social support for parents, learning opportunities for children, and services for families in need.

Schools can improve the readiness of young children by making connections with local child care providers and preschools and by creating policies that ensure smooth transitions to kindergarten. Children entering kindergarten vary in their early experiences, skills, knowledge, language, culture and family background. Schools must be ready to address the diverse needs of the children and families in their community and be committed to the success of every child.<sup>4</sup>

### **We know what works to support early learning and improve school readiness.**

Children will not enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development of infants, toddlers and preschool children.<sup>5,6</sup> Efforts to improve school readiness are most effective when they embrace the rich cultural and language backgrounds of families and children.<sup>7,8</sup> Today we know more than ever before about how young children develop and about how to best support early learning. The strongest effects of high quality early childhood programs are found with at-risk children—children from homes with the fewest resources and under social and economic stress.<sup>9</sup>

State policymakers play a critical role in allocating resources to support the school readiness of young children. Increasingly, state policymakers are asking for results-based accountability in making their funding decisions. While policymakers may recognize the importance of early learning and school readiness, they also need measurable indicators that enable them to track progress. The school readiness indicators that are included in this report were selected because they have the power to inform state policy action on behalf of young children. They emphasize the importance of physical health, economic well-being, child development and supports for families.

### **We can't wait. Success in school begins before a child ever enters a classroom.**

Studies show that at least half of the educational achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children already exist at kindergarten entry.<sup>10</sup> Children from low-income families are more likely to start school with limited language skills, health problems, and social and emotional problems that interfere with learning.<sup>11,12,13</sup> The larger the gap at school entry, the harder it is to close. If we want all children to read proficiently by fourth grade—and to grow into healthy teens and productive adults—then we must make wise investments in the early years.

# The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative

Too many children enter kindergarten with physical, social, emotional and cognitive limitations that could have been minimized or eliminated through early attention to child and family needs. Ongoing research confirms that children's readiness for school is multifaceted, encompassing the whole range of physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive skills that children need to thrive.<sup>14,15</sup> This multidimensional view of school readiness set the context for a three-year, 17 state initiative supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Kauffman Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

*The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative: Making Progress for Young Children was a multi-state initiative that developed sets of indicators at the state level to track results for children from birth through age 8. The goal was for states to use the school readiness indicators to inform public policy decisions and track progress in meeting key goals for young children.*

The attention to tracking state-level outcomes for the youngest children was a unique focus of the Initiative's work. State level data are not always available from federal statistical data systems and states often do not organize available data to look specifically at the needs of young children and their families. The task of participating states was to develop a comprehensive set of school readiness indicators from birth through third grade. Research shows that children who are not performing proficiently in reading by the end of third grade are at very high risk for poor long-term outcomes, such as dropping out of school, teen pregnancy and juvenile crime.<sup>16</sup>

## Objectives

1

To create a set of measurable indicators related to and defining school readiness that can be tracked regularly over time at the state and local levels.

2

To have states and local governments adopt this indicators-based definition of school readiness, fill in the gaps in data availability, track data over time and report findings to their citizens.

3

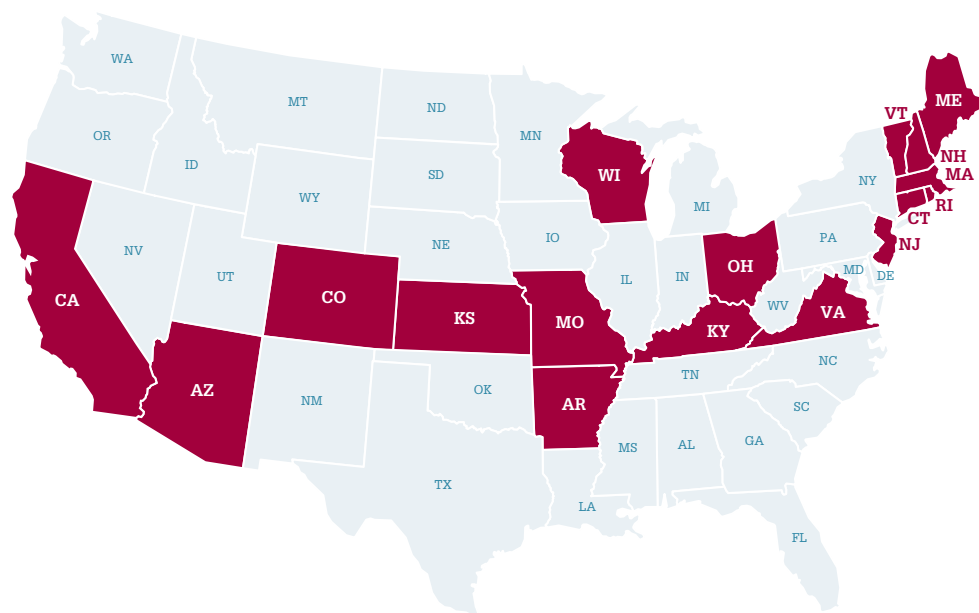
To stimulate policy, program and other actions to improve the ability of all children to read at grade level by the end of third grade.

## Participating States

*The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative: Making Progress for Young Children* involved teams from 17 states, including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin. Over the course of the Initiative, 17 state teams worked to increase their capacity to obtain and use data, to develop effective communications strategies and to inform a school readiness policy agenda.

The lessons learned from the 17 states are a starting point for other states as they develop state and local school readiness indicator systems.

The full report shares the core set of common indicators and the lessons learned from the collective work of the participating states. The goal of the 17 state Initiative was achieved when states produced state-level reports on the set of school readiness indicators selected by their state team and released the reports to highlight key issues affecting young children in their states. Equally important, the states agreed on a core set of common indicators that had emerged from their state work. It is hoped that this rich list of critical measures — based on hard research and state experiences — will serve as a framework to focus more attention on the needs of the youngest children and their families.



The complete sets of school readiness indicators selected by each state are available on the Initiative web site at [www.GettingReady.org](http://www.GettingReady.org).

## The Ready Child Equation

**Ready  
Families**



**Ready  
Communities**



## The Ready Child Equation

Children’s readiness for school is made up of multiple components and shaped by numerous factors. Improving school readiness, therefore, must address children’s development of skills and behaviors as well as the environments in which they spend their time.

Early childhood leaders at the state and national level agree that efforts to improve school readiness must address three interrelated components:

- Children’s readiness for school.
- School’s readiness for children.
- The capacity of families and communities to provide developmental opportunities for their young children.<sup>17</sup>

The School Readiness Indicators Initiative used this view of school readiness as the foundation for its work and created the “Ready Child Equation” to describe the range of components that influence children’s ability to be ready for school:

- **Ready Families:**  
Describes children’s family context and home environment.
- **Ready Communities:**  
Describes the community resources and supports available to families with young children.
- **Ready Services:**  
Describes the availability, quality and affordability of proven programs that influence child development and school readiness.
- **Ready Schools:**  
Describes critical elements of schools that influence child development and school success.

**Ready  
Services**



**Ready  
Schools**



**Children Ready  
for School**

### **The Five Domains of School Readiness**

There is consensus, based upon a wealth of research, that a child's readiness for school should be measured and addressed across five distinct but connected domains:

- Physical Well-Being and Motor Development.
- Social and Emotional Development.
- Approaches to Learning.
- Language Development.
- Cognition and General Knowledge.

While separate and distinct, these domains interact with and reinforce each other.<sup>18,19</sup> The need for children to develop across all five domains is supported by kindergarten teachers. They agree that physical well-being, social development, and curiosity are very important for kindergarten readiness. In addition, teachers want kindergartners to be able to communicate needs, wants, and thoughts and to be enthusiastic and curious when approaching new activities. Teachers also place significant importance on skills such as the ability to follow directions, not being disruptive in class, and being sensitive to other children's feelings.<sup>20</sup>

**The regular tracking of school readiness indicators enables policymakers and community leaders to identify areas most in need of intervention, track the results of investments, and monitor trends over time.**



## Toward a Core Set of School Readiness Indicators

When the School Readiness Indicators Initiative was created, it was hoped that the work of the 17 states would result in a core set of common indicators that could be used as a starting point for other states interested in monitoring school readiness. The intent was to reach a point at which a majority of the nation's states would choose to adopt a common set of indicators that could serve as a national framework for promoting policies that ensure school readiness and school success.

The core indicators and emerging indicators presented here and in the full report are the result of a synthesis of the 17 states' individual work. This core set of school readiness indicators can be a useful tool to guide policies, programs and investments in young children and families.

The School Readiness Indicators Initiative supported 17 state teams as they developed a set of indicators to track and assess progress in supporting the school readiness of young children in their state.

States identified and developed indicators based on the research and science of early childhood development, advice and resources from experts across the country, and peer-to-peer learning during national meetings. The school readiness indicators are being used to measure and track progress towards achieving school readiness and improving the lives of infants and young children.

The individual state products and the full report on the national initiative are posted on the School Readiness Indicators Initiative web site at [www.GettingReady.org](http://www.GettingReady.org).

**While policymakers may recognize the importance of early learning and school readiness, they also need measurable indicators that enable them to track progress. The core indicators and emerging indicators are informed by child development research and the experience of 17 states.**



## A core set of school readiness indicators can guide state and national policy action for young children.

The indicators selected by the 17 states point to a core set of common school readiness indicators. Highlighted on the following pages are core indicators in the areas of ready children, ready families, ready communities, ready services (including health care and early education), and ready schools. Policymakers and community leaders can use the core set of indicators, as well as other indicators that emerge from their own work, to measure progress toward improved outcomes for young children and families. Annual monitoring of key school readiness indicators can signal if things are moving in the right direction—and if they are not. Measuring progress over time can lead to more informed decisions about programs, policies and investments.

The set of **core indicators** were selected based on several criteria:

- Each of the core indicators had been selected as a high priority school readiness indicator by multiple states involved in the School Readiness Indicators Initiative.
- The core indicators reflect conditions that can be altered through state policy actions.
- A change in one or more of the core indicators will influence children's school readiness.
- Each of the core indicators is currently measurable using state and local data.

Also highlighted on the following pages are **emerging indicators**. Emerging indicators are critically important to the school readiness of young children but are currently difficult to measure and track at the state level. The emerging indicators could be tracked if additional work is done to identify appropriate measures and methods for collecting the data over time at the state level and across communities.

School readiness indicators are an important tool for helping government and community leaders better understand whether or not young children will arrive at school ready to succeed. By using the data provided by a comprehensive set of school readiness indicators, states can establish baseline measures for key areas that influence a child's school readiness. Although school readiness indicators cannot be used to establish causal relationships between specific interventions and outcomes, they can be used to monitor progress toward outcomes over time.<sup>27</sup>

School readiness indicators can play a critical role in documenting whether changes are occurring in the desired direction. The most powerful sets of indicators combine information on child outcomes with indicators related to families, communities, service systems and schools.

State policymakers can enhance the usefulness of indicators by analyzing how sets of indicators vary by community of residence, socioeconomic status and racial and ethnic background. School readiness indicators can be used to monitor broad trends and to inform public policy decisions and community level strategies.<sup>28</sup>

Core Indicators at a Glance

The following chart summarizes the core set of common indicators agreed upon by the 17 states involved in the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative. This core set of common indicators is based on the national research and informed by the state experiences in selecting measurable indicators relating to and defining school readiness.

In the full report these core indicators are explained more fully and accompanied by a list of emerging indicators. Emerging indicators are critically important to the school readiness of young children but are currently difficult to measure and track at the state level.

Ready Children

Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

% of children with age-appropriate fine motor skills

Social and Emotional Development

% of children who often or very often exhibit positive social behaviors when interacting with their peers

Approaches to Learning

% of kindergarten students with moderate to serious difficulty following directions

Language Development

% of children almost always recognizing the relationships between letters and sounds at kindergarten entry

Cognition and General Knowledge

% of children recognizing basic shapes at kindergarten entry

Ready Families

Mother’s Education Level

% of births to mothers with less than a 12th grade education

Births to Teens

# of births to teens ages 15-17 per 1,000 girls

Child Abuse and Neglect

Rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect among children birth to age 6

Children in Foster Care

% of children birth to age 6 in out-of-home placement (foster care) who have no more than two placements in a 24-month period

Ready Communities

Young Children in Poverty

% of children under age 6 living in families with income below the federal poverty threshold

Supports for Families with Infants and Toddlers

% of infants and toddlers in poverty who are enrolled in Early Head Start

Lead Poisoning

% of children under age 6 with blood lead levels at or above 10 micrograms per deciliter

## Ready Services – Health

### Health Insurance

% of children under age 6 without health insurance

### Low Birthweight Infants

% of infants born weighing under 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds)

### Access to Prenatal Care

% of births to women who receive late or no prenatal care

### Immunizations

% of children ages 19-35 months who have been fully immunized

## Ready Services – Early Care and Education

### Children Enrolled in an Early Education Program

% of 3 and 4 year-olds enrolled in a center-based early childhood care and education program (including child care centers, nursery schools, preschool programs, Head Start programs, and pre-kindergarten programs)

### Early Education Teacher Credentials

% of early childhood teachers with a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood

### Accredited Child Care Centers

% of child care centers accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

### Accredited Family Child Care Homes

% of family child care homes accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)

### Access to Child Care Subsidies

% of eligible children under age 6 receiving child care subsidies

## Ready Schools

### Class Size

Average teacher/child ratio in K-1 classrooms

### Fourth Grade Reading Scores

% of children with reading proficiency in fourth grade as measured by the state's proficiency tests

Emerging Indicators at a Glance

The following chart summarizes the emerging indicators that were identified as part of the 17 State School Readiness Indicators Initiative. Emerging indicators are critically important to the school readiness of young children but are currently difficult to measure and track at the state level. These emerging indicators can be used to highlight important issues and create the impetus to identify appropriate measures and methods for collecting the data over time.

Ready Children

Assessment of Skills and Behaviors for Preschoolers

% of 3-and 4-year olds with age-appropriate skills and behaviors (in each of the five domains of child development)

Mathematical Skills

% of children at kindergarten entry who can count beyond 10, sequence patterns and use nonstandard units of length to compare numbers

Ready Families

Family Reading to Young Children

% of children ages 3 to 5 who were read to by a family member every day in the past week

Maternal Depression

% of mothers experiencing depression (of all mothers with young children)

Ready Communities

Housing

% of families with children under age 6 paying more than 30% of their income for housing (rent or mortgage plus heat and utilities)

Homeless Children

# of children under age 6 receiving emergency housing services

Neighborhood Conditions

% of children under age 6 living in neighborhoods in which more than 20% of the population lives in poverty

## Ready Services – Health

### Well-Child Visits

% of children under age 6 who received a well-child check-up in the past year

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### Developmental Screening and Assessment

% of children under age 6 with a comprehensive developmental screening within the previous year

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### Developmental Assessment of Young Children in the Child Welfare System

% of children birth to age 3 in the care of the state child welfare system who received a developmental assessment through Early Intervention (Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)

## Ready Services – Early Care and Education

### High-Quality Child Care and Early Education Programs

% of child care and early education classrooms that rank at the top level in a statewide quality rating system

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### Parent Involvement in Early Care and Education Programs

% of early care and education programs with multiple strategies to involve and support parents

## Ready Schools

### Transition Practices Between Pre-School and School

% of schools with formal working transition plans between early childhood settings and kindergarten

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### Special Education and Early Intervention

% of kindergarten children enrolled in special education who were not previously enrolled in Early Intervention (Part C) or preschool special education services

### School readiness indicators are a tool for policy action.

The regular tracking of school readiness indicators enables policymakers and community leaders to identify areas most in need of intervention, track the results of investments, and monitor trends over time. Top-notch school readiness indicator sets at the state and local level are necessary to sustain current investments in the most effective programs for children and to make the case for changes that will improve outcomes for young children and their families.<sup>106, 107, 108, 109</sup>

The focus of the 17 state Initiative was on selecting indicators that could track states' progress in improving the school readiness of young children. Therefore it was important that the indicators related not only to school readiness but also had relevance to state policy.

### Criteria that Guided the Selection of School Readiness Indicators

To be most useful as a tool to inform policy decisions, each indicator selected should meet the following criteria:

- **Is something you care about enough to measure and track.**
  - Reflects an important child, family, or community outcome.
  - Reflects access to service systems or programs that are “widely accepted” as important to child outcomes. (For example, health insurance coverage, early prenatal care, high quality child care).
- **Has policy relevance.**
  - Can be influenced by program or policy changes.
  - Helps to better understand the impact of investments or policy choices.
  - Is something policymakers want to know.
- **Enables states to assess gaps, with special attention to populations at high risk.**
  - Measures the conditions of children, by race/ethnicity and family income.
  - Uses accessible data that is timely and available on an annual basis.
  - Tracks data for the state as a whole and for local communities (county, city, town, neighborhood).
- **Uses measures that are developmentally-appropriate.**
  - Addresses special considerations by age group:
    - birth to age 3
    - preschool
    - kindergarten to third grade.
  - Addresses the special needs of children with disabilities.
- **Uses measures that are relevant across all racial, cultural and language groups.**

## School Readiness: Closing the Gap in School Achievement

Studies show that at least half of the educational achievement gaps already exist at kindergarten entry. Children from low-income families are more likely to start school with limited language skills, health problems, and social and emotional problems that interfere with learning. The larger the gap at school entry, the harder it is to close.<sup>110,111</sup>

### Race, Ethnicity and Income

Children from low-income families and from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds are much more likely to start school already behind their peers in the set of skills that correlate with future school success.<sup>112</sup>

While children from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be poor, research also shows that Black, Hispanic and Native American children consistently have lower educational achievement levels than White and Asian children of similar socio-economic status.<sup>113</sup>

### The Role of Culture in Child Development

Efforts to improve school readiness are most effective when they are responsive to and embrace the diverse cultural and language backgrounds of families and children. Children entering kindergarten vary in their early experiences, skills, knowledge, language, culture and family background. Early childhood programs and schools must be ready to

address the diverse needs of the children and families in their community and be committed to the success of every child.

It is critical that the design and implementation of early childhood policies and practices be examined through a cultural lens.<sup>114</sup> Parent belief systems and patterns of parent-child interactions provide some of the most important ways in which culture is embedded in early child development.<sup>115</sup> There are cross-cultural differences in how parents' access information, make decisions about early learning, and interact with early childhood programs, social services and schools.<sup>116,117</sup>

Closing the school readiness gap will require attention to the multiple influences on early child development, including the contributions of family and neighborhood, home environments related to language and literacy, parenting practices, health status, health behaviors, child care and early education.<sup>118</sup> The growing racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of young children requires that health, mental health, early childhood and education programs periodically reassess their appropriateness and effectiveness for the wide variety of families they serve.<sup>119,120</sup>

**The strongest effects of high quality early childhood programs are found with children most at risk. States face the challenge of making sure that all children are ready to learn while also addressing the tremendous needs of infants and young children at high risk.**



**For the full report on the National  
School Readiness Indicators Initiative,  
including citations and references  
or for more information, contact:**

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